INSIGHTS INTO GENDER FROM THE MALE PUBLIC TOILETS

Martha Elizabeth Smart

My encounter begins as I stand in a long line with a friend waiting to use the toilets at a nightclub. My friend, no doubt in realisation that we would be standing for quite some time, suggested we use the ´men's´ toilet instead. Admittedly feeling an intoxicated boldness, I relished this suggestion and led our march towards the ´men's' with a sense of purpose, empowerment and righteousness. As we walked in, with partially shielded eyes, I flippantly proclaimed to the men present (who were currently all at some stage of doing their ´business´) that the ladies queue was simply too long and we were therefore using this toilet (which consisted, for us, of one private cubicle). Whilst I went to urinate, my friend, in proper clichéd female bathroom style, held the door closed for me and thus was the main point of contact for the hysteria which ensued. Inside the smelly cubical I heard several hushed grumbles, cursing and objections with particularly strong objections coming from the voice of the toilet attendant. Before long I heard the voice of a security guard ordering me to vacate the bathroom stating ´we just don't do that here´. I insisted on washing my hands before I left and as I walked past the rest of the girls, still waiting in line, I did so with a sense of self and social accomplishment - that I would not, and therefore no one need be, bound by gender barriers!

The public toilet is an interesting place that is distinct in its explicit social norms and expectations of what should and should not be done with the body. As a shared social space it stands to mark differences, from the small familiar symbol at the entrance of each, we are divided into two kinds of beings: male and female. Thus how we conduct ourselves inside these spaces is an expectation to conform or not conform to whatever that small symbol on the door might represent. The social norms and rules inside the public bathroom and the physical layout itself, must be seen as decidedly cultural and historical frameworks that both serve to shape and be shaped by the bodies within it. What one might uncover by exploring the specific behaviours that go on inside these spaces is much bigger than revealing things solely about the place itself. The behaviours inside are fundamentally linked to a specifically

cultural way of seeing, understanding and acting out our gendered bodies. As with any social phenomena, these are also places of change and much like our bodies, are not stuck in a static ahistorical composition.

Through interviews and questionnaires with sixteen men of varying ages and occupations, I began to try and understand what exactly goes on for men when they use public bathrooms, how they feel and what is expected of them when they use these spaces; how they account for the differences in sexed toilets and how changes that can be observed surrounding these spaces are seen by them. Aside from being so distinct from my own normality and thus equally fascinating, I believe my decision to focus solely on the behaviours inside the male toilets is justified on the grounds that the norms and expected mannerisms, with regards to the conduct within the male toilets, are particularly salient. Though, this location of course presents my anthropological analysis with positional difficulty. As I cannot be in the male toilets without inherently changing the entire atmosphere due to my gendered appearance as a female, which was so evident during my initial encounter, I am bound to trusting the answers of my informants and to participate in somewhat constrained methods of fieldwork. This is a revealing notion; because who I am is so strongly bound in social terms to what gender I am, I will never be able to experience the 'male´ toilets in their raw and undisturbed reality. Yet I refuse to let this unnerving fact stop me from exploring. Moreover, I think the constraint of my project serves to prove a point in and of itself.

If the fundamental purpose of feminist writing and theorising is to analyse 'how gender relations are constituted and experienced and how we think or, equally important, do not think about them' (Flax 1987: 622), then that is certainly what this project participates in. Thus my project is politicized, it is at once an anthropological analysis of a specific historical cultural phenomenon experienced by men, whilst equally being a critique that should be 'understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living' (Butler 2004 :4). My project aligns with Judith Butler's performative theory of gender which holds that both sex and gender are social constructions. Butler argues that one does not have a sex prior to existing in the social world,

but rather both our sex and gender are constituted by the very acts of doing and engagement that we perform with our relational bodies. Thus the assignment from birth that we are either one 'sex' or another, which the sex segregation of public toilets reinforces, is culturally constructed and does not merely reflect an external, undisputable and unchangeable signifier of personhood. 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler 1990: 45).

In agreement with Butler I contest the natural, pre-social associations linked to our understandings of the body. Such associations often serve to render certain identities illegitimate whilst fixing others. Thereby, concealing the true historical and culturally specific frameworks within which our bodies are socialised into being. Butler's theory accounts for how we perform our bodies and sexuality in different ways within different contexts, something which numerous anthropologists have documented. From a secret lesbian society based outside Athens (see Kirtsoglou 2004) to the open and scarcely stigmatised homosexual relations in Mombasa (see Caplan 1987), anthropologists have demonstrated the myriad of different ways that sexuality and gender are perceived, performed and understood throughout the world. All of which are 'social constructs, developed and sustained within each culture' (Bonvillain 1995:1).

It would seem as though the practice, justified on the grounds of science and biology, of dividing humans into two sexual categories ´male´ and ´female´, is still a prevalent one, particularly when we look to the social justifications for sex-segregated toilets. The relationship between sexuality and nature or biology was clear among my informants when we discussed the perceived reasoning for male toilets tending mostly to be communal urinals and female toilets consisting of almost entirely private cubicles. Efficiency, practicality, anatomy and the privacy of women's bodies were all raised by the various men I spoke with. One of my informants stated ´men feel less concern about public displays of their genitals. I can only assume this is due to the difference in male/female reproductive cycles, where men can reproduce more often than women so they care less about displays. Whereas woman can

only reproduce once a year so they would have to be more guarded´. Another informant stated that the differences were ´purely down to how our genitalia work´, yet then continued ´I suppose if women were more comfortable they could manage to use the open pee urinals´. What these examples represent is a fundamental conflict between nature and culture, in both examples there is blurring of biology and sociality. For my informants the difference between toilets is seen as an anatomical necessity yet also because one sex is deemed, in a social context, to require or desire more privacy than the other.

The answers provided by my informants, which undoubtedly blur biology and sociality, can be explored through the writings of Foucault. In his 1976 book ´The History of Sexuality: Volume 1´, Foucault provided a crucial insight into how and when the notion of sexuality naturalised to a binary frame. He argued that the nineteenth century was a period in which 'sexuality was medicalised, psychoanalysed, biologised' and normalised (Kirtsoglou 2004: 24). It was this period then where a critical transformation occurred, backed by a discourse of scientific reasoning and objectivity, and the social body became highly regulated, constrained and defined by its biological abilities. Foucault recognised the strong link between power and the ability to disperse ideas which come to be recognised as knowledge. The notion that persons and bodies can be uniformly divided into two natural sexes is directly linked to the powers of institutions to disperse certain knowledge and this has continued to shape the ways in which sexuality has come to be understood for many to this day. Foucault stressed that 'sexuality must not be thought of as a natural given…It is the name given to historical construct' (Foucault 1978 [1976]: 106).

The sexual division of public toilets based on a notion of natural or innate sexuality make clear statements about how gender is perceived. Specifically, they 'rest on a concept of privacy that assumes, falsely, both that heterosexuality is universal and that one needs to be private from members of the other sex but not those of one's own sex' (Overall 2007: 80). The importance of appearing as though one is not attracted to other males within the toilet was something which several of my informants raised when we discussed why such strict rules existed such as the ´unwritten rule that men should look directly at the wall if front of them or up to the

ceiling, so as not to look at their own or anyone else's penis´. Or the general rule that ´when possible, you always leave a gap of at least one urinal between you and another guy´. Though many of the men I spoke to thought of these rules as merely a matter of privacy and personal space, there were several times when the notion of homosexuality or perceived homosexuality was raised as an explanation for these norms. One of my informants told me that there was an ´undoubtable stigma over sexuality and to break from these rules might insinuate that you were trying to make a sexual move´. Similarly, another of my informants explained that ´a large portion of men are insecure and challenged by the idea of homosexuality and that is why there is an issue with those who don't conform´.

Equally, two particular experiences of my male informants show how notions of exclusive heterosexuality are so firmly embedded in the social and cultural psyche and how public toilets serve to police any deviance from heterosexual norms. One of my informants who generally uses the male toilets but is ´gender non-conforming´ told me that once when he was dressed particularly ´feminine´ and went to use the public bathrooms in a local shopping centre with a friend, his friend was sarcastically asked by another male, ´why is your girlfriend in this toilet?´ .The same informant explained to be that 'I always use the private cubicles, people identify fast that I am not straight and I feel threatened'. Another one of my informants described a time when he was using a public toilet and caught the eye of another male who then said, 'what are you looking at', in a way that might provoke someone into throwing a punch. That kind of memory never leaves you´. Evidently the explicit sex segregation of public toilets seems to also serve as a self-policing space where those who are perceived as not conforming to heterosexual norms, either in their behaviours or appearance, are threatened and vulnerable.

Clearly my informants demonstrated that which Pan Caplan believes to be a core issue in our society where 'heterosexual relations are seen as the norm, and homosexual relations are stigmatized' (Caplan 1996:2). Nonconformity to the norms of heterosexuality are perceived as problematic because they inherently threaten the view that sex is a natural division of two types of beings. To better understand where the norms of exclusive heterosexuality might

have arisen, we can look again to the medicalisation of sexuality, which privileged biology and tied sexuality to reproduction. Thus we can understand how the importance of heterosexuality was historically and culturally constituted, fundamentally linked to the triumph of one type of knowledge. I believe that the norms and behaviours men are expected to adhere to whilst using public bathrooms is evidence that the toilet facilitates and reproduces notions of exclusive heterosexuality. Yet with the understanding that this exclusivity is a social construction, it should be clear that 'exclusive heterosexuality is thus, far from being chosen, a socially produced instituted process' (Kirtsoglou 2004: 27).

The notion of cultural hegemony, which was theorized by Antonio Gramsci, is useful in explaining why certain individuals seem to embody, reproduce and reinforce prevalent status-quo gendered discourses, even when it is clear that such views are not true for all (and as such, cannot really be true at all). Writing on Gramsci's notion of hegemony, Femina notes that it describes a form of social control in which, aside from influencing behaviour and choice externally, it also affects individuals internally, 'by moulding personal convictions into a replica of prevailing norms. Such 'internal control' is based on hegemony, which refers to an order in which a common social-moral language is spoken, in which one concept of reality is dominant, informing with its spirit all modes of thought and behaviour.' (1981:24). The aggressive behaviour my informants were subjected to when they were perceived as going against the dominant norms and rules of the public toilet might be explained then by Gramsci's hegemony, where dominant ideas become so embedded within the minds and bodies of individuals that they then reproduce and defend these ideas against deviation.

However, the dominant and hegemonic discourses which come to affect gendered bodies are always already operating prior to our becoming. From birth we enter the social world, and are quickly categorised and socialised into one ´sex´. Thus, 'the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author' (Butler 2009:1). Institutions, like public toilets, already existed for my informants, as did the expected behaviours inside. One informant noted, ´we are raised with gendered toilets´ and another, with reference to the behaviour inside, ´it's just learnt´. To a large extent

it would seem as though my informants felt little control or choice regarding how to behave in public toilets or regarding the physical layout of the toilets themselves. More than half of my informants told me that they would prefer more privacy in public toilets. Yet when I asked them if they would engage politically in trying to affect a change in the physical construction of male toilets, I was told that this would ´be seen as a weakness´ and ´demasculinise´ them. One young man told me ´I just wouldn't feel comfortable trying to affect change, men are supposed to be men and manly, that's just the way it is´. This indicates that there is indeed a seemingly hegemonic social discourse or power that shapes and constrains the body, which seems to exist outside of oneself and that certain individuals feel obliged to follow.

Yet Gramsci's hegemony is based on a form of social control gained through consent, not force. Thus whilst dominant discourses no doubt serve to shape individuals, it is a matter of constraint on behaviour rather than complete control. As Cowan rightly points out hegemony equally demonstrates the ways that 'members of different social groups-variously positioned-accept, manipulate, use, or contest hegemonic (that is dominant) ideas' (1990: 13). I found this a particularity relevant notion especially in light of the recent emergence of ´gender neutral´ toilets. At St Andrews University specifically, the decision to create such facilities were a direct result of campaigning and lobbying. What I think this demonstrates is that there are indeed 'certain contexts in which individuals may become more reflexively conscious' (Cowan 1990: 24) of their bodies. Becoming aware of the social constructions that at once bind bodies, we equally become aware of the ability to perform them in different ways. When individuals act outwith the binary understandings of sexuality they prove that firstly, our bodies are not bound to behave according to how we might reproduce, and secondly that bodies can perform sexuality in a myriad of different ways.

The very existence of gender neutral or shared-sex toilets has sparked attention and raised awareness, both for those who have come into direct contact with them, and for those who have heard of them. One of my informants said that whilst at a hostel in London, the shared toilets were simply ´the norm´. Another stated that ´most people, myself included, have never, until recently contemplated what a transgender or nonbinary person would feel when

bursting for a pee´. These responses exhibit again the fundamental notion that how we think about our bodies, our gendered bodies themselves, and the institutions which serve to police or construct them, are subject to historical and cultural change.

By their very existence, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals, or those who do not identify with any sex category, demonstrate the fact that bodies are not intrinsically bound to a notion of biology that dictates our sexual desire to emerge from notions of reproduction. Such commitments to objective science, which Foucault showed emerged from nineteenth century ideas and persisted as dominant modes of knowledge and power, deny or muddle the true social and historical construction of our sex and gender.

I have demonstrated that the justifications for the perceived differences in sex segregated toilets emerged from a hegemonic cultural discourse that privileges anatomy and biology. Yet such justifications cannot escape the fact that this anatomy only becomes a signifier when it is socially acted out and engaged in relations with others. Equally the commitment to biology and the division of individuals into one of two categories, manifests itself in the segregation of public toilets. This contributes to an understanding and embodiment of gender rooted in how we can reproduce, thus intimately connected to the need to be private from those of the opposite sex who should ´naturally´ be desired. The rules and norms that govern where men can stand and look inside toilets, or the fear of threatening behaviour if one goes against such unwritten regulations, prove to be the result of a hegemonic discourse centred around exclusive heterosexuality. Such a discourse continually reproduces itself in the behaviour and sociality of individuals and is often seen as a power which exists outwith one's own choices and preferences, but which is nonetheless to be abided. Yet this is not to say that individuals do not become aware of or seek to contest the socially constructed nature of their sexuality. The awareness and existence of other types of shared or gender neutral toilets are evidence that our bodies, sexualities and genders are all socially constructed things, and only when they are acted out in social contexts do they truly exist.

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